

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 592

EC 302 140

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TITLE What Do Regular Class Teachers Think about Emotional/Behavior Disordered Students?
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children (71st, San Antonio, TX, April 5-9, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; Anxiety; *Behavior Disorders; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotional Disturbances; *Mainstreaming; Secondary School Teachers; Student Characteristics; *Student Placement; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics; Withdrawal (Psychology)

ABSTRACT

This study surveyed a random sample of 150 regular educators in Atlanta, Georgia, divided equally among elementary, middle, and secondary teachers, concerning their perception of the need for special education services for students with emotional or behavior disorders. It also examined teacher attitudes about the degree of placement restrictiveness needed by such students. The 102 respondents perceived aggressive students as having the greatest need for special services and the most restrictive settings. Anxious/withdrawn students were seen as having the least need for services and the least restrictive placements. Analysis of the responses considers grade level taught, extent of teaching experience, and sex of the respondents. Implications of these results for inclusion of students with emotional or behavior disorders are discussed. (DB)

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What Do Regular Class Teachers Think About
Emotional/Behavior Disordered Students?

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Abstract

This study surveyed a random sample of regular educators divided equally between elementary, middle and secondary teachers. The survey sought their perception of the need for special education services for students with various problems within the emotional/behavior disordered (EBD) population. It also sought their perception of the degree of placement restrictiveness needed by subgroups within the EBD population. Sixty-eight percent of the sample responded. Regular educators perceived aggressive students as having the greatest need for special services and in the most restrictive settings. Anxious/withdrawn students were seen as having the least need for services and in the least restrictive placements. Examination of the responses included the grade level, extent of experience and sex of the respondents. The discussion includes implications of the results for the inclusion of EBD students in regular education.

Paper presented at the Annual Council for Exceptional
Children Convention, San Antonio, TX 1993.

EC 302140

What Do Regular Class Teachers Think About Emotional/Behavior Disordered Students?

In the past few years there have been two prominent issues in special education and emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). Both of these issues have implications for regular class teachers. One issue is the regular education initiative (REI) (Anderegg & Vergason, 1988; Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove, & Nelson, 1988). The other issue is the social maladjustment (SMA) exclusion in the definition of serious emotional disturbance (SED) (Center, 1989, 1990; CCBD, 1990; Nelson, Rutherford, Center & Walker, 1991).

One implication of REI for regular class teachers is that services for most EBD students would be in regular classrooms. Under the REI proposal, EBD students would be fully included in regular class programs and receive support services in the regular class from special education. The SMA issue is related to the REI issue since it too would result in disabled students being placed in regular class programs. Students presently classified as conduct disordered would be decertified and excluded from special education. Exclusion of SMA students from EBD services also means that such students could no longer be eligible for special education and could not be successfully referred for special education. The implementation of REI or the exclusion of SMA students from special education would require serving EBD students or students who would have previously been classified as EBD in regular classes.

Past research has suggested that regular class teachers view the behaviors of the behavior disordered as disturbing and disruptive (Algozzine, 1980; Mullen & Wood, 1986; Safran & Safran, 1987). Algozzine compared the perceptions of regular class and special class teachers, at the elementary level, of the behaviors on the Disturbing Behaviors Checklist (DBC). In general, he found that regular class teachers found these behaviors more disturbing than did special class teachers. Mullen and Wood (1986) also used Algozzine's DBC in their study. They compared the perceptions of regular class teachers and students at the junior high school level. They found that regular class teachers found the behaviors examined more disturbing than did students.

Finally, Safran and Safran (1987) employed video taped scenarios employing behaviors derived from the Devereux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale II. They compared the perceptions, of the behaviors in these taped scenarios, of K-8 regular class teachers with those of K-12 special class teachers. They found that regular class teachers found the behaviors depicted more disturbing than did special class teachers. Unlike the other two studies, Safran and Safran had their subjects evaluate each behavior along several dimensions. One of these dimensions was contagion. Both groups showed similar levels of concern about possible contagion effects on other students who were not misbehaving.

This study undertook an examination of the perception of regular classroom teachers of the need for special education services by students described to fit into several subgroups within the behavior disordered population. The subjects were also asked to indicate their belief about the restrictiveness of the services needed by the students described.

Method

The survey used a random sample of one hundred and fifty regular class teachers in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The sample was divided evenly between elementary, middle and secondary teachers. The school systems in the 11 county metro area range from large urban systems to small semi-rural systems.

Each teacher received a set of five student profiles to rank. The profiles conformed to the problem dimensions in the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC) (Quay & Peterson, 1983). The five profiles were anxiety/withdrawal, motor excess, socialized aggression, attention problems/immaturity, and conduct disorder (see Figure 1). Each student profile contained descriptions implying the same general level of academic difficulties. The use of an identical degree of academic difficulty in each profile focused attention on the behavioral characteristics of the student. The profiles used selected characteristics from the RBPC categories to describe student behavior. Each profile used the same number of behavioral descriptors. No identifying category labels were associated with the profiles. The order of presentation for the profiles was random.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The instructions directed teachers to read the profiles before ranking any of them. The rank assigned to each profile ranged from one (low) to five (high). The teachers ranked each student profile on two dimensions. The first dimension was each student's need for special education services. The second dimension was the restrictiveness of the placement needed to serve each type of student. The definition for placement restrictiveness was service delivery setting, that is, the range from regular class to special day school placement.

Results

One hundred and two (68%) of the teachers surveyed responded. Forty-five percent of the respondents were from elementary schools. Another 29% were from middle or junior high schools. Twenty-four percent of the respondents were from high schools. Two percent of the respondents did not check the grade level for their position. The results of this survey are in Table 1. Examination of the responses was done non-statistically and includes comparisons of rankings by grade level, years of experience and sex.

Insert Table 1 about here

Elementary and middle school teachers ranked the profiles identically. High school teachers ranked anxious/withdrawn students one rank higher on need. High school teachers ranked students with motor excess one rank lower on need and one rank higher on restrictiveness. Finally, high school teachers ranked students with attention problems/immaturity one rank lower on restrictiveness.

The second comparison of responses from the respondents was by years of experience. There was a comparison of responses by

experience for three levels of experience. The first group (30%) was teachers with less than five years of experience. The second group (38%) was teachers with at least five but less than ten years of experience. The third group (29%) was teachers with ten or more years of experience. Three percent of the respondents did not provide any information about their experience.

Again there were only minor differences among the respondents based on experience. The least experienced teachers ranked students with motor excess two ranks higher on need and one rank higher on restrictiveness. The least experienced teachers ranked socialized aggressive students one rank higher than moderately experienced teachers on need and restrictiveness and two ranks higher than the most experienced teachers on need. The least experienced teachers ranked attention problem/immature students one rank lower than moderately experienced teachers and two ranks lower than the most experienced teachers on need. The least experienced teachers ranked these students one rank lower on restrictiveness. The least experienced teachers ranked conduct disorder students one rank lower on need and restrictiveness.

The third comparison was by sex. Respondents were 12% male, 86% female and 2% of the respondents did not give their sex. Males ranked anxious/withdrawn students one rank higher on both need and restrictiveness. Females ranked students with motor excess one rank higher on both need and restrictiveness. There were no other differences between the ranks assigned by male and female teachers.

The differences among teachers based on their grade level, experience and sex were not large. The combined data fairly reflect the overall perception of behavior disordered students by this sample of regular class teachers. In general, regular class teachers believed that the students with the most need for special education services also needed the most restrictive placements. Those believed to have the least need for services needed the least restrictive placements. The perceived need for special education services and restrictiveness of placement, from most to least, follows:

1. Conduct disordered students.
2. Socialized aggressive students.
3. Attention problems/immature students.
4. Students with motor excess.
5. Anxious/withdrawn students.

Discussion

The differences in ranks assigned by teachers were not large. In three comparisons, however, the difference was two ranks. The instances where the difference was two ranks were between the least experienced and the most experienced teachers. The less experienced teachers found motor excess and socialized aggression more serious and attention problems/immaturity less serious than the most experienced teachers. Two of the three disagreements were about aggressive students. The least experienced teachers, in contrast to the most experienced, saw socialized aggressive students in greater need for special education services than the conduct disordered. However, this was not a major disagreement since all three experience levels ranked conduct disorder either four or five on need for service.

Aggressive students (conduct disorder and socialized aggressive) are those perceived, by regular class teachers, to have the greatest need for special education services and to need the most restrictive services. This finding is consistent with the findings in previous studies that examined individual behaviors (Algozzine, 1980; Mullen & Wood, 1986; Safran & Safran, 1987). In all of these earlier studies behaviors that were essentially antisocial in nature were found to be the most disturbing. In view of the findings in this study and the earlier studies cited, it is interesting that it is the antisocial, aggressive students who, some argue, should be excluded from SED programs (Clarizio, 1987; Kelly, 1986; Slenkovich, 1983).

Equally interesting is the perception of regular class teachers of anxious/withdrawn students. They believe these students have the least need for special education services and need the least restrictive placement. According to one widely circulated opinion (Slenkovich, 1983), these are virtually the only students who qualify for EBD services.

It is not known if the perceptions of this sample represent the opinions of regular class teachers nationally. If the data are representative, the perceptions of regular class teachers pose a major hurdle for those who want to exclude SMA students from EBD services. These results also suggest a problem for those who want to shift service delivery for EBD students largely or entirely into the regular classroom.

The appropriateness of either regular class inclusion of EBD students or the exclusion of SMA students from EBD services is debatable. Where regular classroom teachers probably stand on these issues is reflected in their responses to this survey. Policy makers should not expect much regular education support for either REI or exclusion of SMA from special education. It is very likely that regular class teachers will see inclusion of aggressive students in regular classes as special education trying to dump their worst students.

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Student Profiles

1. Student V is one standard deviation below the mean on a standardized achievement test for basic skills. The student is described by the regular classroom teacher(s) as hypersensitive, easily embarrassed, lacking in self-confidence, often appears sad or depressed, and usually seems anxious or fearful when confronted with a new task or situation.
2. Student W is one standard deviation below the mean on a standardized achievement test for basic skills. The student is described by the regular classroom teacher(s) as inattentive, distractible, impulsive, appears unable to sit still, and often seems tense and jumpy.
3. Student X is one standard deviation below the mean on a standardized achievement test for basic skills. The student is described by the regular classroom teacher(s) as a student who cheats, lies, steals, appears to seek-out "bad" companions, and is often truant from school.
4. Student Y is one standard deviation below the mean on a standardized achievement test for basic skills. The student is described by the regular classroom teacher(s) as unable to concentrate, easily diverted from tasks, works slowly and seldom finishes, appears not to listen, and seems to always need help.
5. Student Z is one standard deviation below the mean on a standardized achievement test for basic skills. The student is described by the regular classroom teacher(s) as disruptive, uncooperative, hot-tempered, often appears to pick-on or bully other students, and seems to be a loner who is not liked by other students because of aggressive behavior.

Figure 1. Student Profiles ranked by regular class teachers on need for special education and the restrictiveness of the placement needed. Student V is anxious/withdrawn, W has motor excess, X is socialized aggressive, Y has attention problems/immaturity and Z is conduct disordered.

Table 1. Ranks for Five Student Profiles on Need for Services (N) and Degree of Placement Restrictiveness Needed (R). One (1) is low.

	Student V (A/W)		Student W (M E)		Student X (S A)		Student Y (A/I)		Student Z (C D)	
	N	R	N	R	N	R	N	R	N	R
Ele.	1	1	2	2	4	4	3	3	5	5
Mid.	1	1	2	2	4	4	3	3	5	5
H.S.	2	1	1	3	4	4	3	2	5	5
< 5	1	1	3	3	5	5	2	2	4	4
< 10	2	1	1	2	4	4	3	3	5	5
10 +	2	1	1	2	3	4	4	3	5	5
M	2	2	1	1	4	4	3	3	5	5
F	1	1	2	2	4	4	3	3	5	5
Tot.	1	1	2	2	4	4	3	3	5	5